

Donkey, Draft Horse, and Mule Practice: Overview

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Mules are the offspring of a male donkey (Jack or Jackass) and a female horse (mare). Their size, shape and use are often determined by breed characteristics of both the sire and dam. Thus, mules can come in all statures, colors, and types of conformations, etc. They once were used primarily as riding, packing and/or working animals. Today, mules are used for the previously described purposes, as well as for guards (eg small ruminants), shows, recreation, and pets. The female mule is traditionally referred to as a female, mare mule, Molly or Molly mule, whereas the male mule is traditionally referred to as a male, gelded/stud mule or John mule. Mules are considered more sure-footed, patient, hardier, and slower than horses, and less obstinate than donkeys. As donkeys have 62 chromosomes and horses have 64, the mule hybrids are rarely fertile. The cross between a stallion and a Jenny is a Hinny, which tend to be more donkey-like and much less common than mules

There are approximately 30 breeds of draft or draft horses found in the world today. These horses (1400 -2600 lbs) are utilized in farming and logging industries, blood/plasma donation, biological and pharmaceutical production, advertising campaigns, as carriage horses, show horses and pets. Of the most popular breeds of draft horses used in the United States, the Belgians, Clydesdales, Percherons, and Shires all originated in Western Europe. These breeds were selected for their overall tall stature, heavy bone/frame structure, muscular hindquarters and patience in order to haul large loads. Traditionally, these working animals are thought to have a similar nutrient metabolism as pony breeds.

Donkeys or asses (*Equus africanus asinus* or *Equus asinus*) traditionally have also been considered working animals. In North America, donkeys or “burros” are used for work, show, cart and/or carriage pulling, competitive riding, drug smuggling, as guard animals, training animals and pets. There are 15 to 20 breeds of donkeys, including miniatures, standards, large standards, and mammoth stock, which vary greatly in size (32-62 in). The female is commonly referred to as a Jenny or Jennet, and the intact male is commonly called a Jack or Jackass. These animals characteristically have longer ears and make loud vocal noises (“bray”), as compared to horses. quality.

Geriatric care

Whenever presented with the geriatric Draft horse/Donkey/Mule, a complete physical examination, including but not limited to a thorough oral, lameness/orthopedic/ophthalmic, skin, etc examination, should be performed. Although ill health and disease may exist, the practice of geriatric medicine in most instances should emphasize: 1) dentistry, 2) medical maladies, 3) arthritic conditions, 4) dietary modification to accommodate existing problems, and 5) general health maintenance/husbandry. As behavior, competition for feed, arthritis, failing eye sight may decrease feed intake in the geriatric, the clinician should help the owner maintain adequate feeding space, safe feeding areas, and that water supplies, mineral container/feeders and feed bunks are designed for adequate nutrient intake.

On the initial visit, blood should be collected for a complete blood count and serum biochemistry panel in order to help identify medical or metabolic conditions that may be present. Aging Draft Horse/Donkey/Mule nutrition may be similar to that of young growing horses, as more digestible protein, energy, and mineral/vitamins may be required.

Supplemental reading & references

Wilborn RR, DG Pugh. 2011 Chapter 299: Donkey Reproduction, in, *Equine Reproduction*, 2nd ed, McKinnon Angus, Edward Squires, Wendy Vaala, Dickson Varner editors; Wiley-Blackwell Press, West Sussex, pp 2835-2838

Pugh DG: General Draft Horse Mule & Donkey Medicine. Proceed WVC EQ37, 2014, pp1-3

Pugh DG: A short discussion of Draft Horse, Mule, and Donkey Feeding, JT Vaughn Horse Course, 2013, pp1-3